

[The Awakening](#) by [TrippyToasters](#)

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Summary:

Felix told them not to use the strange book the Gabomba statue gave them. But Jenna's curiosity got the better of her...

1. Part I - The Book

“I’m not touching it again.”

Three Adepts and one Alchemy sage stood before their leader, who was seated at a table. A large book bound in black leather rested on the table before them, the eyes of the leader locked on it even as they all stared at him. The ship they were in rocked ever so slightly, the gentle waves going unnoticed by them all, for they were all used to the sea after a month or so of sailing.

“I don’t understand,” The first to speak up was of course their leader’s fiery sister, Jenna. “We sailed all the way back to Kibombo to take that stupid statue’s test so we could get that thing. Now you’re saying you don’t want to use it? What a waste of time.”

“I understand your frustration, Jenna,” Felix replied, taking his eyes off the book to meet her gaze. “Believe me, I do. I am quite frustrated by this as well. But the matter is settled. I’m locking the book away.”

“Well, let me try it at least!” Sheba said suddenly, reaching for the book. Before her fingers could even brush against the spine, Felix grabbed it off the table, and held it away from her.

“This book...” Felix said in a stern voice. “This... Necronomicon... It has to be locked away. Nothing good can come of the use of it.”

“But the Psynergy you used with it looked really cool!” Sheba pleaded. “C’mon, I’m tired of using that stupid card. If you don’t want to use the necrothingie, that’s fine. But you don’t have to be a prude and spoil the fun for us!”

“Sheba, I believe Felix’s words should be heeded here,” Piers warned. “He would not be so rigid in his decision if he did not have a good reason to.”

“Piers is right,” said the Alchemy sage. “Such dark and ancient artifacts should not be used so carelessly. My recommendation is to lock this book away and never touch it again.”

Sheba and Jenna sulked at his words. They turned to Felix, as though expecting him to disagree, but knowing all too well that he would not. He was the first to be worried by the strange, alien book they had found. And they were met by a stern gaze.

“The book is being locked away,” Felix said to the girls. “The vote is three to two, but as I am the leader the vote itself is an act of courtesy on my part. I never intended to give you the option to take the book. I only called this meeting to tell everyone not to use it again.”

“What gives? I thought this was a democracy!” Sheba sulked.

“I was not the one who chose to be this group's leader,” Felix reminded her. “If you want the authority to call the shots, then you must also accept the responsibility of making the right ones. This includes taking the lives of everyone in this room into your hands, deciding who lives and dies in unavoidable situations that call for it. And not only your lives, but the lives of everyone on Weyard, if the things Kraden has been saying are true. Would you want to have such things on your mind all day and night, just to be able to decide who gets to use a mere book?”

Sheba backed down, grumbling out a very reluctant, “No...”

"I thought as much," Felix opened his bag, and slid the hefty book inside. "Then my decision rests. Everyone, stay away from this book. I'll hold onto it for now. Kraden and I will dispose of it when a chance arrives."

The group meeting was over, so everyone dispersed. Piers returned to the helm of the ship, Felix went to put the Necronomicon in his room, Kraden went to his study, and the girls went to have their lunches up on the crow's nest.

"What bug crawled up Felix's ass today?" Sheba asked as they ate.

"What do you mean?" Jenna replied.

"You heard him. He was all: 'Leadership, blah, blah, blah, responsibility, blah, blah, blah, everyone's lives, blah, blah, my decision stands'."

Jenna giggled. "I guess he's just stressed out. You know how he is. Always taking everything so seriously, all angsty and conflicted."

"Whatever," Sheba sighed. "He can't act all emo. I've seen him laughing before. It's just a book, what harm can it seriously do?"

"I'm sure he's just doing what he thinks is best for us," Jenna said. "As Piers already said, he wouldn't be so adamant about it if he didn't have a good reason."

"But what reason?" Sheba demanded. "What reason could possibly make a book so dangerous? The Psynergy it gave him wasn't that bad. It's just a book. Man, now I really want to know what was written in that thing."

Jenna didn't want to admit it, but she did too. The worst way to keep something from a teenager was to tell them they could not have it.

But she did respect her brother's wishes. She wouldn't go near the book.

“Whatever,” Sheba sighed. “Enough about the book. Where are we going next? I think Felix said something about the Shrine of the Sea God...”

But Jenna's mind was occupied with other thoughts. The temptation to read that book had taken hold of her, and would not relinquish its grip. Her brother's warnings echoed in her ears, but she was simply too curious to let go of the idea.

Surely, one little peek wouldn't hurt...

That night, Jenna retired to the bedroom she shared with Sheba early. She got a few hours of sleep, then awoke in the dead of the night as she had anticipated. Sheba's quiet breathing was the only sound in the room.

Jenna rose as carefully as possible and inched her way to the door, being especially careful not to let the old wood at her feet creak. After an agonizingly slow walk, she made it to the door and inched through. Sheba's soft breathing was steady.

Jenna stepped into the hallway of the Lemurian ship, its ancient corridors illuminated only by the silver moonlight casting beams through the windows. Jenna passed Pier's cabin on her way to Felix's room.

She opened the door to her brother's room as slowly and quietly as possible. She knew her brother sometimes stayed up very late, and she had no way of knowing if he would be up until she was actually in his room. Her eyes took a while to adjust to the darkness. She saw the vague outline of Felix on his bed, his face buried in his pillow. He snored quietly.

Jenna inched into the room and shut the door without actually closing it. She looked around the room, seeing the shadowy outlines of Felix's few possessions. But where would it be...?

Of course. Jenna crawled to the floor and reached underneath Felix's bed, being careful not to bump him. Ever since he was a child, Felix had hidden things under his bed. She was right. Her fingers brushed against the bag from before. She grabbed it and pulled it out. She crawled to the other end of the room, sitting beneath the window, where the moonlight was strongest.

A feeling of hesitation.

Perhaps this was a mistake... She could still turn back, she realized. She hadn't taken the book out of the bag yet.

But she knew she would regret it. Jenna was not the kind of person who thought things through. She acted on whim more often than not, and she never regretted the consequences it brought. She would not let such an opportunity pass her by.

With trembling fingers, Jenna drew the leathery book from Felix's bag.

Time seemed almost to slow. She ran her fingers across the black, unmarked cover of the book. It was deathly cold. The

texture was strangely familiar. The book felt almost... Almost like it was...

Alive.

The paper was rough and unyielding, a strange contrast to the smooth cover. She opened to a random page. Printed on the coarse paper were alien words she had never seen before. She dared not even whisper as she tried to read them. Actually uttering the words felt... wrong to her. But even reading the alien text silently was a challenge.

*Ol for feari ur T'jigif ciuc Disifajifa xuosir citiubolih.
Sifus or les ceuc xifodif dul isitiluj joi,
ulic ol risitulihi uielir iwil ciusif bug coi.*

Jenna was short of breath. She was drawn into the dark and foreign words, unable to think of anything else. The minutes crept by. The rough pages of the book shimmered in the silver moonlight. The words were strange to her eyes. They looked painful to speak, unnatural and forced to a human tongue, but still beautiful in a strange way.

Jenna closed the book, and held it close to her heart. She was filled with a warm feeling. She felt content and at peace. All of her previous fear and hesitation was gone.

She realized this, and lucidity struck her like lightning. She threw the book down in disgust as though it were a giant insect. It landed on the wooden floor with a loud thump.

Jenna's blood ran cold. She looked over at the other side of the room, where her brother slept. He groaned, rolled over, and resumed his snoring. Jenna let out a relieved sigh. But her fear was not gone yet.

The book lay motionless on the ground before her. The air around the unholy tome was distorted in Jenna's eyes. She didn't want to touch it again. She wanted to leave the abomination where it was and run back to her own bed. But she had to put it back where she'd found it, or Felix would know.

Jenna held Felix's bag in her left hand and hesitantly reached for the black book with her right. Her fingers wrapped around the spine. The hairs on her arms were on end. There was a kind of electricity emanating from the book. She felt she had done something horribly wrong. She felt like she had activated it or something.

Yes...

It was her thought, but it felt wrong. It felt forced, like it had come from another. And in that moment, it really sank in.

This book was evil.

She understood her brother's warnings now. Without another hesitation, Jenna threw the book in Felix's bag. For a fraction of a second, the book stuck to her, as though resisting her rejection of it. Not long enough for one to notice, but to Jenna it felt like an eternity.

She closed the bag and shoved it back under her brother's bed. She left the room a bit faster than she meant to, though at that point she hardly cared if she was caught. She just wanted to get away from it. How her brother could actually sleep so close to that much dark energy was a mystery to her.

Relief did not come to her after that. She made her way back through the moonlit hallway. The shadowy corridor, illuminated only by rays of silver moonlight, had been

beautiful to her a few minutes ago. Now every shadow seemed to be a hiding place of devils. Every movement was a attack waiting to happen.

Jenna feared little. She was a Mars Adept, and a powerful fighter. But she couldn't fight night terrors. The intangible was terrifying to her.

She returned to her room, and closed the door as quietly as possibly so as to not disturb Sheba. Even so, the young Jupiter Adept seemed to notice her return, as she sat up and rubbed her sleepy eyes.

"Where you been...?" Sheba asked her, her words slurred by drowsiness.

"Bathroom," Jenna quickly lied.

"Mmmmm," Sheba muttered, falling back and pulling her sheets over her head.

Jenna went to her own bed and pulled her sheets over her head. She wasn't as scared now that she was in the security of her bed. And Sheba's adorable breaths helped ease her tension. But she was still on edge.

Something...

Something wrong had happened. She should have listened to her brother. She shouldn't have touched that book.

She could feel it.

She could feel the dark energy of the book emanating all the way from Felix's room.

It was calling to her.

Jenna knew better than to think what she was thinking. The book wasn't alive. It couldn't possibly be alive. But it had...

It had whispered to her...

Jenna closed her eyes, as though it would block out the dark thoughts.

She wouldn't go near the book again. She would forget it. She would refuse to acknowledge its existence. That was the only way to fight something like that.

It didn't exist, it didn't exist, it didn't exist, it didn't exist, it didn't exist...

If she kept telling herself that, she might believe it.

It didn't exist.

It didn't exist.

It didn't exist.

"Jenna!"

She turned to find a certain red-haired Mars Adept approaching her through the crowded streets of Kalay. Gareth waved excitedly as he ran to her, and she couldn't help but grin.

"That was about an eight, Gareth," she laughed as he reached her. "Try to keep it below a five."

He laughed as well. "Sorry. I'm just glad to be out of the house. Kay's been in a mood today, where she gets mad

over the slightest things. She gets like that sometimes, but I don't know why."

Jenna knew why. She was surprised Gareth didn't. He really was clueless sometimes.

"You need to have talk with your parents, I think," Jenna said to him.

Gareth raised an eyebrow. "About what?"

She just laughed.

"Are we still having lunch later?" Gareth asked, eager to change the subject.

"Yeah, sure," Jenna replied. "Ivan will be joining us, right?"

Gareth nodded. "Yeah, he's been pretty tied up lately with helping everyone from Vale settle in, so he's really looking forward to some downtime with friends."

"Sounds like you are, too!" Jenna teased.

Gareth laughed and looked away. "I always look forward to spending time with you, Jenna."

"Oh, Gareth. Get out of here! I'll see you in a few hours."

They both laughed and Gareth left her, after promising that he'd be waiting at the restaurant with Ivan. Jenna sighed as he left. Gareth was very kind. Sometimes a little too kind, actually. He coddled her. She loved him, sure. Just not the way he seemed to wish she would.

The streets of Kalay were crowded despite it still being early morning. She had just arrived in the city with the other refugees from Vale, and everything was still being

organized. Jenna, Felix, and their parents were still settling into their new house, and they had a lot of stuff to unpack. She had been hoping to get some fresh air and quiet before the day's events began, but that was clearly not to be. Her headache had only been worsened by the humming chatter of the pedestrians.

With nowhere else to walk, she followed the streets back to her new house. She stepped inside to find Felix and her parents already busy unpacking boxes.

"Oh, Jenna! There you are," her mother said as she entered the living room. "Where were you?"

"Just taking a walk."

"Oh, okay. Here, this one is all your things." She handed Jenna a heavy box. "You can unpack and organize your room for now. We'll worry about the living room and the kitchen later."

Jenna left for her new bedroom, carrying the heavy box effortlessly. Her years of travel and battle had left her tougher than most girls. A mere cardboard box was nothing compared to Dullahan or the Doom Dragon. Still... the evacuees from Vale had left their doomed hometown with next to nothing. How in the world had they ended up with so much to unpack?

What a mystery.

She made her way up the stairs and rounded the corner, heading towards the bedrooms. Because of the large box in her arms, her vision was obscured, so she didn't notice Felix in front of his own door with a heavy stack of boxes in his arms until she collided with him.

“Gah!!”

They both tumbled, boxes falling around them. One of Felix's boxes landed on its corner and popped open, its contents pouring out.

“Shit!” she swore. “Felix, I'm sorry. I didn't see you there.”

Her brother sat up, rubbing his temples. She pushed her own box aside and moved to collect the things that had fallen out of Felix's. It seemed to be mostly books he'd gathered during the adventure. She picked them up indiscriminately and tossed them back in the box.

Contact.

Time seemed to freeze. She knew what it was she held. She didn't even need to look. She was touching it. It was there. It was breathing between her fingers.

The Necronomicon.

She'd put it out of her mind. She had spent weeks denying its existence. She had convinced herself the events of that moonlit night had been a surreal dream. She had forgotten.

Whispers.

Daylight couldn't protect her. The company of others couldn't protect her. Not when she was this close to it. The childhood comforts of safety were meaningless against this alien construct. The fear was back. It came rushing back to her like an opened floodgate. She shivered. She trembled. She gasped.

Comfort.

She closed her eyes. The world seemed to dissolve around her. The walls around her melted as wax. She fell. She sank deep into the depths of her innermost self, where all truths were laid bare and all things were without consequence. She saw herself as a child, sitting alone in a foreign landscape of nothingness. Her child-self hugged her knees. She was cold. She was alone.

Everyone had left her.

She hated the feeling of being alone. She hated isolation. She hated denied affection. She was so lonely.

There was a sound. Water was dripping. She looked up through her tear-stained eyes. Another drop. Where was the water coming from?

The dripping became a trickle. The trickle became a sprinkle. The sprinkle became rain. The rain became a downpour. The downpour became a hurricane.

The sound of gallons of water rushing down filled her ears. The empty landscape began to fill. She was being flooded. It was rising so fast. Already she was submerged to her waist. She would drown if she didn't swim.

Where was the comfort now?

An image struck her, filling her inner vision. Felix. Her mother and father. Their bodies, dead and decayed. They were floating along the river, the gentleness of the river betraying the gruesome sight of their waterlogged bodies.

"That's a lie!" she screamed in defiance. "They didn't die! They survived that day!"

True. They did. Perhaps that was your misfortune.

She struggled to rise as the water filled the abyss. She would drown if she didn't keep her head up.

She saw the depths of Sol Sanctum. The Elemental Star Chamber. The beautiful blue water that filled the chamber sparkled gently. It was indeed a stunning sight. Until she saw Isaac and Gareth.

Isaac had been the lucky one, his neck having been broken by the fall. Gareth was less fortunate. He lay motionless, floating atop the sparkling blue water. At first he had tried to climb back up the glowing cliff to safety. For hours he had tried in vain to scale the slippery rocks. At last he had given up, and he now waited for death to take him.

"No..." she whispered. "That didn't happen. They made it out of there. They followed us."

Who can say what reality is? All you know of the world around you is what you perceive by your five senses. The things you see, the things you touch... Tastes, smells, sounds... Your Psynergy is something of a sixth sense. But all of these things... They can lie to you. Do not trust your mind so much as you do.

Jenna struggled against the waves that threatened to engulf her. The black abyss had become a raging ocean. She kicked against the waves with all her strength.

She was panicking. She would drown if she didn't fight.

A series of images flashed through her mind.

Ivan, sinking with the Tolbi-bound ship...

Mia, unable to tread on the waters of the Mercury Lighthouse...

Sheba, lost forever beneath the raging waves of Idejima...

Piers, gone with his ship in the wake of the tidal wave...

"Stop it! Why are you showing me these things?!"

You fear this...?

"I don't want to see my friends dead!"

Do not fight the embrace. Do not rely on your senses. Give in. Let me comfort you.

Jenna realized something at those words. She stopped fighting. It was easy, so much easier than her previous struggle. She sank beneath the waves.

It wasn't dark or cold. It was warm and comforting. She wasn't suffocating.

I can give you so much, Jenna.

I can make your every desire a reality.

She smiled. Where was her fear? She didn't care anymore. It felt so nice to be comforted in this way.

"Jenna?"

She looked over to find her brother staring at her expectantly. His hand was held out.

"Oh, sorry!" she handed him the book. "I guess I spaced out for a bit."

"Right," Felix muttered tiredly. "I accept your apology, but try to be a bit more careful next time, okay?"

"S-sure,"

Felix rose without another word, lifting the box of books and entering his room. Jenna waited for a minute, before doing the same.

"I'm sorry?" she asked in confusion.

Garet and Ivan were watching her with strange looks. Ivan sighed.

"Did you not even hear the question, Jenna?"

"Sorry, I guess I didn't."

"Are you feeling alright?" Garet asked, concern in his eyes. "You've been really distant today."

"Sorry, I don't mean to be."

"And you're apologizing a lot," Ivan observed. "Not exactly the Jenna we're familiar with."

"Sorry..."

"You see! Right there!"

Jenna jumped a bit at Ivan's sharp words. She knew he had a point. She wasn't being much like herself. But she couldn't help it. Ever since she'd touched the book...

She was on edge.

Even in the middle of the day, surrounded by her friends and family, she couldn't help but be uneasy. The book had crept back into her mind, leaving its foul odor behind. It was

just like all those months ago on the ship... She was afraid again.

But it was different this time. She wasn't afraid of the book itself. But rather...

She was afraid of how relieved she had been.

"Well, even if Jenna is out of it, I'm having a good time," Gareth said mockingly. "How about you, Ivan?"

"I'm rather tired," Ivan replied. His eyes showed it, too. "But I am enjoying this quiet lunch. It's nice to get away from responsibility for a while."

"Wouldn't know," Gareth laughed. "I lucked out. I was going to have to take over as the mayor of Vale at some point. I do miss the village, of course. But I'm so relieved that I won't have to take care of everyone now."

"You didn't want to?" Ivan inquired.

"I don't think I could handle it," Gareth said. "A job like that shouldn't be decided by family, I think. They should let whoever can do the job the best do it."

"And how would they decide that?" Ivan asked.

"Let the people decide. Whoever the most people vouch for would get the job. It seems a much better system, if you ask me."

"That would never catch on," Ivan said, shaking his head. Then Gareth started laughing, and Ivan joined in.

Jenna laughed as well, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

She couldn't stay away.

She knew she was making a mistake, but something was drawing her back with a force she had not the will to resist.

She was in Felix's room, just as she had been months ago in the Lemurian ship. It was just as dark, she was just as quiet, and her brother was asleep, snoring just as quietly as last time. It was like history was repeating, save for the changed surroundings.

She found the book exactly where she expected to, right under Felix's bed, in the same bag as before. She pulled the book out.

Immediately, all the fear and unease was gone.

Comfort...

She realized then, that it wasn't the book that was causing her to feel so anxious... It was being apart from it. The book was a part of her, and being separated from it was what made her so afraid.

She held the tome close to her breast, and sighed softly at the feeling of warmth that spread through her body. Her skin tingled. Her pink lips curled into a smile.

She felt so at peace.

She didn't know how long she remained there, just holding the book close to her and smiling, but it didn't matter. Time was irrelevant.

She moaned softly.

***“GEEEEEEEEETTTTTTTT
OOOOOOOUUUUUUTTTTTTT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”***

Jenna's heart skipped a beat. Her brother was awake. He was awake and screaming with the rage of the heavens themselves. She rose, still holding the book close as though afraid to let go of it. She had half a dozen excuses on her tongue, but she knew Felix wouldn't believe any of them. She prepared to apologize...

And she stopped.

Felix wasn't awake.

He hadn't even moved. He was laying in his bed, snoring quietly, with an arm tossed over his face to cover his eyes. He mumbled something quietly, and rolled over.

Then... who had screamed?

She knew the answer. Nobody had screamed. Her ears were lying to her.

Just as she had been told they would.

She was jolted by the false scream. Though she wanted to spend more time with the book, she wasn't about to test her luck.

She placed the book back in Felix's bag. The moment it left her hands, she felt the unease and the insecurity return. But now she knew why she was feeling that way, so it didn't bother her anymore.

She crept out as quietly as she could. Felix did not stir as she left.

"Isaac, do you want to have lunch together later?" Jenna asked.

Isaac frowned. "I'm sorry, Jenna. I'm going to be busy all day today helping out my parents. Everything's been so chaotic since we got here."

Jenna tried her hardest not to look too disappointed. "Okay. That's fine. We can go on a date some other time, right?"

Isaac looked down, and hesitated, as though he wanted to say something but couldn't. A moment later, he looked back up at her. "Yeah, we will. See you later, Jenna."

Isaac left, quickly disappearing into the crowd of people around them. Jenna walked home, feeling a bit more depressed than she figured she should be.

Isaac wasn't... avoiding her, was he?

No, that was silly. They had been friends since childhood. They had spent so much time together. He had comforted her after she lost her parents. They had shared a first kiss. They had promised they would get married one day...

The memory was enough to bring Jenna out of her depression and put a spring back in her step. An idea came to her. Even if Isaac was too busy to spend time with her... she could still do something for him.

An hour later, Jenna emerged from her house with a small wicker basket in her hands. The faint but unmistakable aroma of freshly baked cookies drifted out of the basket.

Jenna quickly found Isaac's house and knocked on the front door. She heard Dora calling her in, so she opened the door and stepped inside.

Jenna froze for a moment.

The house was organized and furnished. Dora was sitting on a couch, folding laundry, while Kyle sat next to her, reading a small book.

Isaac was nowhere in sight.

"Oh, hello Jenna!" Dora said to her. "What can we do for you?"

"Isaac... isn't here..." Jenna said quietly.

"Oh yes, I believe he said he was going to be having lunch with a friend of his," Dora said. "I can't remember where he said he would be, though..."

Kyle set his book down and adjusted his reading glasses. "The orchard," he said.

"That's right. He got a few things from the kitchen and left for the orchard behind the palace."

Jenna frowned. "I see. Thank you, Ma'am. I'll be going now."

As she solemnly walked away from Isaac's front door, Jenna noticed Gareth walking up to her with a big stupid grin.

"Hey, Jenna! What's up?"

Jenna scowled. Normally, she would have the patience to deal with Gareth's dumb jokes and his obvious crush on her. But today...

“You pig,” Jenna spat. “You're always stuffing your face. Then here! You can have these!” Jenna shoved the basket of cookies into Gareth's chest with enough force to push him off balance. Then she turned and ran towards the palace, ignoring Gareth's confused shouts.

It didn't take her long to reach the orchard. By then her fists were clenched in rage, even as tears ran down her cheeks. Normally she enjoyed going to the orchards. The different kinds of trees, the fruit, and the birds always put her in a good mood. But there was only one thing on her mind now.

She knew exactly who Isaac was with.

Once she spotted them, Jenna hid behind a tree and silently watched.

They were having a picnic. Isaac was smiling. The blue-haired whore with him was giggling. Then she gasped as Isaac reached into the basket and pulled out a bottle of alcohol. Isaac poured them both glasses and they made a toast. They emptied their glasses, and set them aside. Then they moved closer.

They started to kiss. Fleetinglly at first, and then deeper and more passionately. The whore moaned sensually as Isaac moved from her lips and kissed the base of her neck.

Jenna chose that moment to reveal herself.

“How could you do this to me...?!” she screamed.

Isaac and Mia broke apart and stood up. “J-Jenna?”

Jenna pointed her finger at Mia. “How could you betray me like that? How could you leave me to be with that whore?!”

"Jenna what are you talking about?" Isaac demanded.

Do it.

"You promised me, Isaac!" Jenna cried. "You said we would be married!"

Isaac was agape. "Jenna... we were six years old and playing a game!"

"It wasn't a game for me!" Jenna screamed.

"Jenna, I'm truly sorry you had to find out this way," Mia offered. "You know I always valued your friendship, and I never meant to hurt you..."

Do it.

"Shut up, slut!" Jenna spat.

Isaac and Mia exchanged glances. "Jenna, we're free to make our own decisions," Isaac said calmly. "We were going to tell you when the time was right, but we never..."

Isaac continued to speak, but Jenna was no longer listening. His voice grew faint and distant, as though she was hearing it from underwater. Jenna felt a strange presence, like a comforting warmth.

"It's you..." she said with a dopey smile.

You know what you need to do. Remember? I told you everything.

"I do, but... would that be right?"

It is your right. This is your world now. Everything you see, everything you desire. If you want something, make it yours.

You don't deserve to feel pain anymore.

"I know. I've felt so much pain over the years." She remembered all the loss. Her family. Her brother. She had thought them dead. And Isaac had comforted her. He had been her knight. He had traveled across the world to save her after she had been abducted. But now...

You do not deserve it, Jenna. If he doesn't love you... make him.

"Yes..."

Her perception returned to the present. Isaac and Mia were now staring at her with confused and concerned expressions.

"Jenna, are you okay?" Isaac asked.

Her lips twisted into a devilish smile.

"You were talking to yourself..." Mia said.

Jenna ignored her and looked straight at Isaac. "You love me, Isaac. I know you do."

Isaac stared at her for a moment, then sighed. "Jenna, please. Don't make this difficult. I love Mia. But you're still one of my best friends and-"

Isaac's eyes widened and he took a step back. Mia did the same. For they could both sense the Psynergy Jenna was gathering.

"Jenna, are you insane?!" Isaac demanded. "Don't do this!"

"This isn't how things are meant to be," Jenna said in a voice that was not her own. "I must make things right."

Isaac tensed up, standing in a half-crouched position, ready to move. He was hesitating. He didn't want to hurt Jenna, but he may be forced to restrain Jenna if she became violent. Hopefully, they could talk her down.

"Jenna, please," Isaac pleaded. "Just... calm down. We can talk about this."

"There will be no talking!" Jenna screamed, shaking her head back and forth. "You will not speak again until I say so!"

Isaac wanted to say more to her, but felt it wouldn't be a good idea. So he simply closed his mouth and waited.

Jenna gave him a hard look. "Do you love me, Isaac?"

He nodded. It was best to agree with her. Besides, it wasn't untrue, he simply did not love her in a romantic way.

Mia looked at him, then back to Jenna, and back to him again.

"You always loved me, right?" Jenna continued. "You were just waiting for the right time to tell me."

He nodded again. There was so much he wanted to say to her, he just couldn't bring himself to say them.

"This slut over here..." Jenna said with a contemptuous nod to Mia. "You never cared about her. She's just a plaything. And now that you've realized your feelings for me, you have no further need for her... isn't that right?"

Isaac nodded. He looked over at Mia, the girl he had been kissing and whispering sweet nothings to only a few minutes ago. How could he possibly want the Imilian whore over a

girl like Jenna? His eyes had no trace of affection for Mia anymore.

"In fact... the very thought of her makes you sick."

It did. He felt nauseous as the memories of him touching her came to his mind. He fantasized about Jenna instead... and he felt warm and light at those thoughts.

Mia looked concerned now. Something was wrong, and she didn't understand. Why wasn't Isaac chastening Jenna for saying those things? Why was he looking at her with... such disgust? She felt hurt.

"Isaac... don't just let her say those things. Please, say something! Tell her how you feel!"

He did not. Instead, he turned away, unable to look at Mia anymore. He felt like he would vomit if he had to look at her ugly face for even another moment.

"You may speak again, Isaac," Jenna said with a sweet smile.

"Thank you, Jenna," he replied.

"Isaac, what's happening!" Mia exclaimed. "What is she doing to you! This isn't you, snap out of it!"

"Get out of here," Isaac said with no hint of pity. "I'm tired of you. You were amusing for a while, but I've accepted that my heart truly belongs to Jenna." Isaac went to Jenna's side and took her hands in his, like they were getting married.

Mia held back the tears. This was so wrong. She prayed it was some sort of cruel joke. They had spent hours together. They had confessed their love for each other under the stars.

She was saving herself for when they were married, and he was doing the same.

“What did you do to him, you bitch?!” Mia screamed.

Jenna turned to her, a devious gleam in her eye. “As for you, Mia... you will never have another man. You will never desire another man. You like girls now. For the rest of your life, you will be attracted to girls, and men will disgust you. All your religious stigma against homosexuality will not prevent you from feeling this way. Girls get you hot.”

Jenna turned away for a moment, but then turned back with an evil grin.

“Oh, and you get turned on very easily now.”

Mia's jaw hung open in sheer disbelief as Jenna walked away from the orchard with Isaac on her arm. What was this nonsense she was talking about? Mia scoffed at the very thought. She loved Isaac. Nothing would change that. Mia swore that she would figure out how Jenna was controlling Isaac, and free him from her thrall.

Still, Mia could not take her eyes off Jenna's cute rear as the girl walked away...

The only sound in the house was the quiet scraping of forks across plates.

Jenna's family ate their dinner with a sort of quiet somber among them, which was unusual for the usually lively and conversational family.

Only Jenna seemed to have any life in her. She had a grin plastered to her face, which did not fade even as she chewed. Her eyes were far-away and dreamy, filled with memories she kept to herself.

Naturally, Jenna was done first. She broke the silence by rising and quietly excusing herself. She ran off, and vanished through the front door.

Neither parent commented on this. They simply finished their respective dinners and sluggishly went to bed.

As soon as they were gone, Felix was on his feet, and headed towards his own bedroom.

He went to his bed and pulled the large black bag out from underneath. He tore it open and grit his teeth.

“Damn...”

The Necronomicon was gone.

Jenna sighed blissfully, and rolled over. Isaac lay beside her, devoid of clothes as she was.

“That was wonderful,” Jenna said. “I never knew making love could feel so... incredible.”

“I enjoyed it too,” Isaac said.

The room they were in was dark, but Jenna could see perfectly. The thick, leather-bound book beside her was like a battery... it enhanced everything. Seeing in the dark was only one of the many things she had realized she could do when she had it. After her first experience with Isaac, she

had thought of the book and wondered if it would feel even better if she had the book with her.

And it had.

Every single sensation... every feeling and touch... every second felt like a minute. It had been unlike anything she had ever experienced. In all her life, she had never felt as alive as she did in those moments.

She knew she could go again. But Isaac... she would have to wait for him to recover. She felt disappointed.

The book whispered to her, reminding her of her powers. She had full control over everything Isaac did. She could make him ready...

She smiled excitedly at the thought.

Just as she was about to do that exact thing, the door of Isaac's bedroom burst open and there was a crashing sound. Before Jenna or Isaac could react, she felt the bed being violently flipped over, sending them flying back into the darkness. Her head hit the invisible wall, and everything started spinning.

Everything was dark, so she couldn't see. She heard Isaac scrambling up and attacking the man who had stormed in, obeying her silent command. She heard the sound of blows being exchanged, and felt Isaac collapse next to her in the shadows.

Jenna could feel the attacker take the book, and leave without a word. The loss of it filled her with sorrow and emptiness. But she also felt a flash of rage. She knew who it was. The only person who could have known about the book.

“Felix...”

Jenna rose and lit a candle. “Isaac, get dressed. We have to go after him!”

“Yes, Jenna. I will.”

It didn't take them long.

Felix was waiting for them outside their house. His arms were crossed, and he did not carry the book.

“Where is it?” she demanded.

“Locked away, where it belongs,” Felix replied. “Not in my bedroom, of course. In a secret location, where you won't find it.”

“Give me the fucking book, you asshole!” Jenna screamed. She felt weak... sickened. She felt empty without the book.

“It's too dangerous,” Felix said simply. “Already, it's corrupted you with its dark magic. You need to be separated from the book. It'll be hard, but eventually, its taint will go away, and everything will be back to normal.”

“Felix, give me the fucking book, or I swear I'll rip your fucking eyes out!!” Jenna screamed. She felt lightheaded. She needed the book back... she could feel her powers slipping away.

“I'm sorry Jenna,” Felix said in his most sympathetic voice. “This is for your own good.”

“Aaaaaaarrrrggggh!!” Jenna screamed. “Isaac, get him!”

Felix put up a good fight, but he was unable to hurt his sister or friend, and it was still two-to-one.

They knocked him unconscious, and dragged him away into the woods.

Felix opened his eyes.

Jenna and Isaac were standing over him. Isaac looked, as he had before, like Jenna's brainwashed zombie. Jenna, on the other hand, looked bad. Her eyes were red and sunken in, her chest heaved with every breath, and she trembled.

"You're going into withdrawal," Felix said. "You should be in bed right now, not out in the woods."

"Shut up!" Jenna commanded. "Tell me where the book is!"

"I won't," Felix said. "And you must know by now that you cannot use the dark magic the book gave you to force it out of me, either."

Jenna bit her lip. He was right. She had tried already. Something was blocking her new powers... it wasn't her separation from the book, because she could still control Isaac.

Still, she had to get it out of him somehow...

"Isaac..." she said to her thrall. "Get him to talk. Don't break anything or leave any permanent damage. But make him hurt."

Felix's screams carried through the forest for half an hour. But he did not break. He had endured worse in Prox, all

those years ago.

He did not struggle or fight back, because he could not hurt them. He knew Jenna wasn't in her right mind. He knew it was the book messing with her.

So he endured in silent agony.

Jenna paced back and forth while Isaac interrogated Felix. At last, she realized nothing would come of it, save for his screams potentially drawing unwanted attention. She ordered Isaac to stop, and she stood before her bleeding brother and stared at him.

Just how could he resist her abilities? She had the power to control any person she saw... why was she unable to do so with Felix?

She noticed her brother was clutching his bleeding hand, which was understandable, as Isaac had likely broken a finger. She reached down to take Felix's hand, in order to see how bad it was, and he drew away from her. She grabbed the hand more forcefully, and felt a burning in her own.

Jenna drew back with a pained hiss, her hand slightly burned by the touch. She looked at Felix's hand, and saw what had caused it.

A Cleric's Ring, which had the power to resist curses.

"Of course..."

Felix's eyes widened. He struggled against his bonds, but there was no escape.

"Isaac, take that ring off him."

Garet, watched in silent terror from behind a tree as Jenna marched back to the village with a grin, Isaac and Felix following obediently behind her.

2. Part II

Kraden jumped at the sound of furious knocking.

"Jenna..." he muttered. "It has to be her."

Kraden looked to the locked and chained wooden chest, hidden away in the corner of his living room, beneath a stack of books. The elderly sage could not feel the Necronomicon's evil magic, but Felix had often warned him of what could happen if it should fall into the hands of someone without will enough to resist its temptations. And when Felix had discovered Jenna had taken it, he had entrusted it in Kraden's care.

For Kraden was no Adept, and he could not hear the whispers.

Jenna continued to pound on his door, and Kraden remained at his table, doing best to ignore Jenna's furious rapping.

"Kraden, open the door!" Jenna pleaded from the outside. "Please!"

There was pain in her voice, and he longed to ease the poor girl's suffering. But Felix had told him not to listen to her, no matter what she said.

"Kraden, please!"

He looked up, to see Jenna was looking in at him from the other side of his window. She look ghastly, malnourished, sick... Kraden hated to see her like that. However, it was a lot easier to ignore her when she wasn't pleading with him with with her burning eyes.

"Jenna, I cannot," he said. "This is for your own good."

"Kraden, please let me in!" Jenna cried. "I'm dying. Felix won't... he would let me die just because of that book. I'll bet he didn't tell you that I'll die without it now! Kraden, please don't let me die out here in the cold..." There were tears running down Jenna's cheeks.

She was dying...? Would Felix really hide that from him?

No, he wouldn't. Not something like that. It was a trick. The desperate manipulations of a desperate person experiencing withdrawal. Kraden had to be strong for both of them.

He stood and moved to the window. Jenna's face, still beautiful despite her condition, grew hopeful, as she believed he was letting her in. Instead, he stopped at the window, and looked at her with shame in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said to her. "This is for your own good."

Kraden pulled the curtains closed.

Jenna all but screamed, and she threw herself up against the glass. She begged and pleaded with him, but he did not move from the sofa in the center of his living room, his gaze locked on the wooden chest that contained the vile thing that was tormenting Jenna.

Jenna pleas grew quiet, and for a moment Kraden feared that she had been telling the truth, and was now lying dead in the street. He reassured himself that Felix would not lie to him.

Long minutes passed.

Kraden wondered if Jenna had left. Allowing himself to check, he turned around in his seat and looked to the window.

Jenna's silhouette had not moved.

A chill ran down the Alchemy sage's spine. Something was wrong. Jenna was too quiet, too still... she was watching him through the curtain, her gaze locked on his exact position in the room, even though she could not possibly see him through the blinds.

Kraden turned back around, unable to meet the girl's unseen gaze. Instead, he found himself staring at the wooden chest that held the Necronomicon, and another shudder ran through him. Kraden was no Adept... but he could feel something. There was evil in that book. An evil so great and ancient that mortals like themselves had no hope to even think of resisting.

The sage suddenly felt claustrophobic. He felt pressed like a worm pressed between two boulders. While before he had been guarding the book from the outside, he now felt like the book and Jenna were trapping him.

"My powers are fading," Jenna said slowly. "I grow weak, and lack the strength to break down the wood of your door, or the glass of the window. My thralls must sleep, or drain me further. I am weaker now than I ever was before I bled and could control Psynergy."

The voice that spoke was not that of the hopeful girl Kraden knew. The pitch was still the same... but there was no emotion in her words. The inflections were wrong, like someone who had never spoke was trying words for the first time.

The wrongness of it made Kraden uncomfortable. It was like he had fallen right into the uncanny valley, surrounded by living dolls and things with artificial faces. Was Jenna even the same person anymore? Or had some thing from the book entered her and taken over?

"But I can still feel you, Kraden," Jenna continued in her unnatural voice. "I can feel all the things you hide from the world. All the frustration... all the loneliness. The way you hate yourself when you realize what parts of Mia and myself you had been staring at..."

"S-stop..." Kraden said, too quietly for her to hear.

"How you desire to feel the delights of the flesh, as you once did when you were a young man," Jenna said. "How you long to be with your wife. The wife who died too young. An accident... an explosion in your own Alchemy lab in Tolbi. An accident that haunted you with the possibility that it may have been your fault."

"How do you know these thing...?!" Kraden demanded. "Stop talking about that! You have no right to talk about her!"

"I see all the nights you cried," Jenna said. "How you pleaded with the gods to give her back to you. The gods that you never believed in. How you swore to do anything to have her back."

"Stop-!"

"I can give her back to you, Kraden."

He froze.

"The gods cannot restore your beloved wife," Jenna said. "Nor can the wonders of science or Alchemy. But my power..."

my power can. All you have to do is open the door."

He trembled. How he missed his wife... How he longed to feel her in his arms again... How he wanted to hear her voice one more time.

He had long ago forgotten what her voice sounded like.

"Just open the door, Kraden."

Garet did not sleep that night.

Instead he sat upon his bed, his sword cradled in his lap. He watched his door like a man hunted, expecting Jenna and the brainwashed Isaac and Felix to burst through at any moment. To turn him into whatever they were...

He was exhausted when the sun finally rose and his parents and siblings rose and began their morning routine. He put his large sword back in its place on his wall, but he took a dagger and carried it in his pocket.

He went to breakfast and ate what he could. He was so tired and nervous and afraid he felt like he was going to throw up. But he forced himself to nibble on his toast and drink a couple sips of orange juice.

His strange behavior did not evade the notice of his family.

"Are you feeling alright, Garet?" his mother asked. "You look like you didn't get much sleep last night."

"I, uh... had a stomachache," he lied lamely.

His sister Kay snorted. "That's what you get for eating like a pig all the time."

"Oh, that reminds me!" his mother said. "I wanted to ask about those cookies you brought over. Jenna made those, didn't she?"

Garet looked up suddenly. "How do you know that?"

"Well, that is her family's basket, isn't it?" Garet's mother continued. "Did she make those for us? Because if so, I'd better do something for them in return."

The image of Jenna brainwashing his mother entered Garet's mind, and he panicked. "No! Nonono, she made them for Isaac, I think. But he didn't want them or something, so she gave them to me."

Kay rolled her eyes. "Jumpy today, aren't you?"

"Oh, I see," his mother continued. "In that case, you should take them back to her. I don't think it would be right for us to enjoy something she made for someone else."

The color drained from Garet's face. "I don't think that's a good idea. She, uh... didn't want them for a reason."

"Nonsense!" his mother said, waving away his protests. "You don't have anything else to do today, do you? No, of course not. Go ahead and take the cookies back to Jenna and her family. I was going to make brownies later, so it would be unnecessary for us to have so many snacks."

His father and Aaron grunted in agreement.

"Fuck..." Garet muttered under his breath.

Ten minutes later, Garet was pulling on his boots, with a basket of day-old cookies beside him, when his sister approached him.

"What did you do?" Kay asked him.

"What are you talking about?" he replied.

"Come on, it's the most obvious thing in the world," Kay told him. "Let me guess: you stole those cookies from Jenna, didn't you?"

"I did not!"

"Well, you definitely pissed her off in some way, then," Kay said. "You're always trying to get in Jenna's pants; there's no way you would say no to any chance to go see her. And whenever you get her mad at you, you're always running from her in fear. That's why you were up all night, because you were waiting for her to burst through the door and come after you."

Garet sighed. That last one was too true for his comfort.

"I'm going with you," Kay said. "Knowing you, you'll try to ditch those stolen cookies. You'll never learn unless someone makes you. So hurry up, and let's get going. I have other things to do today."

Garet swore under his breath again. He had been planning on tossing the cookies in a garbage can somewhere. Was he really that predictable?

Garet and Kay departed from their household and crossed the streets of Kalay on their way towards Felix and Jenna's house. Garet glanced at the various faces in the throng of people as they wove through – some familiar, some he had never seen. How many of them were under Jenna's control? Was it just Isaac and Felix? Was it everyone in the town except for him? How could he possibly tell?

Every set of eyes that met his felt like a judging suspicion. He had never been so paranoid in all his life.

They reached Jenna's house, and before Gareth could say anything, Kay stepped up and rang the doorbell.

Nobody answered.

"I guess nobody's here," Gareth said. "Too bad. Let's go."

"Like you're getting out of this that easily," Kay scoffed. "The door's unlocked. We can still leave the cookies here." Kay turned the handle of the door and it opened. She disappeared inside, and with a frustrated sigh, Gareth followed her.

Sure enough, the place was empty. No Jenna, no Felix, and no parents either.

"Don't touch anything," Kay told him with a stern glare. Then her face split into a devious smile. "I'll be right back. Go leave the cookies in the kitchen."

Kay then ran off towards Felix's room, leaving behind her unamused brother.

"Hypocrite," Gareth muttered as he made his way to the kitchen. "I bet that's the whole reason you wanted to come here in the first place..."

Gareth left the wicker basket on the kitchen counter. He left and returned to the living room, where a faint glimmer of light caught his attention. He noticed something on the bookshelf, placed between two of the books.

Felix's Cleric Ring.

And with that reminder, the fear returned to him in a cold rush. There was no way out of his current situation. Kay would not let him get rid of the cookies, and she would naturally make sure he left them right where she told him. Of course, as soon as Jenna returned home, she would see the basket and know he had been there. He could stick with his cover story, that he had been coerced by his family to return them, but even if Jenna bought it, it would only make her more cautious. In the worst case scenario, she would suspect that he knew, and try to assimilate him just to be safe.

It was entirely possible that she was going to assimilate everyone anyway, or that everyone was already under her control in some way. In that case, the Cleric's Ring would be his only protection. And this was his only chance to take it. If Kay came back while he was still deciding, she would not let him take it. In fact, she would probably tell Felix or Jenna. So if he wanted to take it, he had to do it immediately.

However, if he did take the ring, then the moment that Jenna or Felix returned they would realize someone had come in and taken it. Which would mean that someone knew what was going on. And then they would look in the kitchen and see the basket...

Garet swore. No matter which option he took, he was still screwed in the end.

"Damn it all..."

He then heard Kay's voice calling to him from upstairs, "Garet, you better have done what I told you to do!"

Garet reached out and took the Cleric's Ring from the bookshelf and stuffed it in his pocket.

Kay emerged from atop the stairwell, giving him a suspicious look. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything!" Gareth protested. "I put the basket in the kitchen, just like you told me to."

Kay strode past him and went to the kitchen. She emerged a moment later, seemingly surprised that he was telling the truth.

"I guess your brain won out over your stomach for once," she sighed. "It'll come back around by lunch time, though. You didn't have much for breakfast, I noticed."

At the mention of lunch, Gareth remembered his plans. He was to have lunch with Ivan at the palace, much like they always did. He wasn't sure if he could go now. With the knowledge that Jenna was brainwashing people, Gareth didn't know who he could trust anymore.

Still, he needed help and Ivan was a pretty safe bet. The boy was no fool, and his own mind-reading abilities would likely help in figuring out who was under Jenna's control, and who wasn't.

Assuming Ivan wasn't already one of them.

Gareth would simply have to approach Ivan in a way that wouldn't be very obvious.

"Are you being brainwashed by Jenna?"

Ivan stared at him, at a loss for words.

Before he could pull away, Gareth took Ivan's hand into his own and slid the Cleric's Ring onto his hand.

Nothing happened.

Ivan looked down at the ring, raised an eyebrow, and then looked up at Gareth again.

"Is there maybe something you'd like to talk about?" Ivan asked.

Gareth pulled the ring off Ivan's hand and stuffed it back in his pocket. "Yes. Let's go somewhere private." He looked around a few times, to make sure nobody had seen them, before taking Ivan's hand and leading him away.

They went to one of the guest rooms in Hammet's palace, and Gareth locked the door behind him.

Ivan crossed his arms. "So... what's this about Jenna now?"

Gareth stayed with his ear pressed up against the door for a minute, listening for the sound of anyone who may have followed them. Once he was satisfied, he turned back to Ivan. "I think Jenna has been turning people in the town into mindless servants."

"Well, she certainly has her admirers, but I don't..."

"I'm not joking, Ivan," Gareth said with his firm, 'I'm serious' face. He checked the door one last time, then sat down and told Ivan what he had seen in the woods.

Ivan listened closely, nodding a few times, and keeping a level expression the entire time. Once Gareth had finished his story, with his account of finding the ring in Jenna's house, Ivan closed his eyes for a moment, thinking.

"And you're really serious about this?" Ivan asked. "It's a rather difficult story to believe, so if this is part of some

elaborate joke your no-bullshit mode will lose all credibility."

"I'm not making this up," Gareth insisted. "I saw what I saw. I hope I was wrong, or that I just had some bizarre dream, but I know the difference. I've never been so paranoid in my life. At the least, we can't trust Jenna, Isaac, or Felix anymore. You're the only person I dared to talk to about this."

Ivan sighed and sat up. "Well, this changes things. Either I've got two very crazy friends, or you're both telling the truth. Being the brother of a prophet, I'm not allowed to believe in coincidences, and this one is just too abstract to be plausible anyway."

"Huh? Wait, two?"

Ivan nodded. "Yeah. Come with me, I think we should all discuss this together."

Ivan led Gareth out of the guest room and through the halls, to the other side of the palace. On this other side, yet another guest room awaited. Ivan reached in his pocket and pulled out a key, which he used to unlock the room. They then entered.

Mia was lying atop the bed, her eyes open and staring listlessly at the ceiling. She turned her head to look at them as they entered the room, and she blinked in surprise when she saw Gareth was with Ivan.

"How are you feeling?" Ivan asked her.

"Not much better," Mia replied in a tired voice. "It just won't go away. No matter what I do, I just can't stop... well, you know."

Mia's cheeks burned red and she looked back up at the ceiling. "I'm so ashamed of myself. It's all wrong... all of it. I feel so disgusting. I... I hate myself."

"What happened?" Gareth asked.

Mia's lips trembled, a single tear running down the side of her face. But her eyes narrowed in rage, and she spoke with hatred: "Jenna."

Gareth and Ivan pulled chairs up beside Mia's bed. The healer did not move, or turn her gaze away from the ceiling, but she continued to speak to them.

"She did something to Isaac. We were having lunch in the orchards. The day was perfect. Then Jenna showed up and changed Isaac somehow. She made him say these horrible things to me, and then they left together. She turned him into some kind of puppet. I went to him, but he ignored me like I wasn't even there."

"Gareth told me that he saw Jenna doing something similar to Felix," Ivan told Mia. "Apparently, Felix was immune to her powers until she took the Cleric's Ring off of him."

"The Cleric's Ring..." Mia muttered. "Yeah, that's right. We found that in Crossbone Isle. I gave it to Felix so that he could use that Darksword. It resists curses."

"Right," Ivan said. "But it doesn't let you get rid of them, if I remember correctly. I nullified the dark effects of the cursed gear, but we still couldn't get rid of it."

Mia's cheeks were flushed and her breathing heavy. Her gaze was distant, like she was thinking about something else. Gareth was about to ask her if she was alright, but Ivan spoke first.

"Focus, Mia!" the small boy snapped.

Mia blinked, and then she turned and buried herself in her pillow, sobbing.

"I'm sorry..." Mia cried. "I'm so sorry. Please don't hate me..."

Ivan placed his hand on Mia's shoulder. "Don't talk like that. We're gonna figure this out. We could never hate you, especially not for something that isn't your fault."

Mia rolled over, and gave them a sad smile. Her eyes were red and exhausted.

"What happened?" Gareth asked, no longer able to stand not knowing.

Ivan sighed, preparing to explain, but Mia hushed him and told Gareth herself.

"She didn't just change Isaac," Mia explained. "She did something to me, too. She told me... Gods, she told me that I wouldn't like men anymore. She said that from now on, I would be attracted to other women. I didn't believe her at first. I thought she was just nuts. But once I got back to town, I kept looking at girls and... thinking lewd thoughts about them."

Normally, Gareth would have cracked a joke about something like this, but with how upset it was clearly making Mia, even he couldn't be so insensitive. Gareth knew when to keep his mouth shut.

"We have to do something about this," Gareth muttered.

"But what?" Ivan mused. "At least three of our friends are under the book's influence. The only ones who aren't are

Sheba and Piers, and they're away. For all we know, Jenna could have everyone else in the town under her control right now. What can we possibly do?"

"Someone or something is controlling Jenna," Gareth declared. "I've known her my whole life, and she would never do something like this. Not in her right mind."

"We have to figure out where she is getting these powers from," Mia muttered. "We have to separate her from whatever is making her this way."

An idea came to Gareth, and he turned to Ivan. "I've got it. This situation is desperate enough that you can break your rule, right?"

"My rule...? Oh! You mean my promise not to read anyone's minds."

"Yeah. It'll be the easiest way to figure out what Jenna is doing, and how she got these powers. Just look into her memories of the past few days."

Ivan frowned. "I dunno. I mean you're right, the situation certainly justifies it... but Jenna would know immediately that I was using Psynergy."

"So we create a distraction."

"That could work on an ordinary person, but an Adept would still sense my Psynergy."

Gareth scratched his chin. "Well... then we just need a way to distract her and have a reason for you to be using Psynergy at the same time. She will think you're doing something else."

They thought about it for a moment, wracking their brains for ideas.

"I got nothing," Ivan sighed.

"Me neither," Gareth said. "Yeah, that's a stupid plan. We would be trying to get her to both ignore and pay attention to you at the same time. My plans suck."

"Maybe..." Mia said quietly. "It would be possible to have someone else using so much Psynergy that Jenna would not notice the small amount needed to read her mind."

Gareth and Ivan both looked at her.

"Go on," Gareth said.

"Gareth, how much Psynergy do you have available?" Mia asked.

He thought about it. "With all my Djinn set? Enough to torch the whole town if I needed to."

Mia nodded. "Good. Here's my plan..."

Jenna stopped in front of her house, with Felix and her parents in tow, because someone was blocking her path. A palace guard stood before her, holding a scroll which he handed to her as she drew near.

"What is it?" she asked, taking the scroll.

"Your invitation to the palace," the guard said. "There's going to be a special feast prepared this evening for you and your friends and family, and an announcement made at its conclusion."

"A celebration in my honor?" Jenna asked, blinking in confusion.

"For all the Warriors of Vale," the guard corrected impatiently. "It will begin soon, so you had best go straight to the palace."

He should be more respectful to me, Jenna thought. "This is awfully sudden."

"I'm very sorry, my lady," the guard muttered sheepishly. "I only know what they told me to tell you."

"Hmm..." Jenna considered. While she had been hoping to return to her bedroom and read from her favorite book, the idea of a big celebration sounded fun. She turned to her brother and parents, and they all nodded silently.

"Okay, then," Jenna said with a smile. "Let's go."

"Right this way, my lady," the guard said, trying to hide his nervousness. "Please, watch your step."

A few minutes later, they found themselves at the palace, which was alive in activity. All around, servants were carrying trays of fine food and assembling decorations. A table had been set up, with enough seats to hold two dozen people, and was covered in a mouth-watering selection of Kalay's best.

Jenna quickly spotted Ivan, who was surrounded by servants that were listening closely to his orders. It seemed that, as usual, he was organizing things. She wanted to go over to him and ask about this big sudden event, but he was clearly too busy. She figured she would have plenty of time to question him once the feast actually began.

"Felix!" came a loud voice from across the hall.

Jenna groaned silently as Garet's older sister Kay ran up and started talking to her brother. Felix replied with the same terse sentences he would always use when confronted by Kay and her obvious infatuation with him. Jenna rolled her eyes and looked elsewhere.

In the conundrum that was the busy palace Jenna saw many faces, some familiar, some new. None of them stopped to pay her even the briefest of glances. She started to feel rather unloved. Mentally, she called out to Isaac.

Her golden-haired love came to her a few minutes later, having apparently been somewhere else in the palace. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close, and she felt warm and safe.

The people who passed by in the palace would now glance at her occasionally, and they would instead smile and nod to her. Nowhere did Jenna feel the coldness of a judging stare.

Everybody loved her.

A flash of blue and white caught Jenna's attention, and she just barely managed to catch a glimpse of someone running up the stairwell off to the side of the palace.

Jenna grinned as an idea formed in her head. She turned to Kay, who was still forcing conversation with her brother and began to whisper in the red-haired girl's ear.

Mia returned to her secluded room, short of breath and shaking. It hadn't been the race back that had frightened her or left her the way she was. Mia collapsed on the bed, tears forming in her eyes as she remembered.

The image of Jenna being held by Isaac like that...

She hated Jenna. A part of her wanted to take her mace in hand and march down to the hall and strike Jenna over the head until she moved no more.

Mia had never before had such violent thoughts. The only person she had ever come to hate was her cousin Alex, who had betrayed her clan to light Mercury Lighthouse. But that had faded with time, for she herself had eventually made the same betrayal. She would never reconcile with Alex, even if he did still live. There were other reasons why she hated him.

But not even Alex could arouse such feelings of rage in her.

Part of Mia wanted to go and murder Jenna in cold blood in front of a hundred people. The other part of Mia... wanted to pull off Jenna's clothes and kiss her nude body.

Mia's cheeks burned red. She gripped her pillows until her knuckles were white. No matter what she forced herself to think about, nothing she did could ease the lust she felt. Her whole body burned with desire.

The door to her bedroom opened, interrupting her futile efforts to cleanse her mind. She turned in the bed, expecting to see Ivan, but instead she was greeted by Gareth's elder sister, Kay.

"Mia, what are you doing up here by yourself?" Kay asked her. "There's going to be a big celebration downstairs. Don't tell me you're planning on hiding up here while everyone else has fun?"

Kay smiled as she spoke, and that alone was enough to set Mia's pulse racing.

The redhead drew closer to Mia's bed, and she spoke in an increasingly impish voice. "It's not healthy for girl to spend all her time alone, you know. You have to get out... and do things..."

Kay's arms wrapped around Mia's neck, and the girl moved in and sat upon Mia's lap. Her face was only a few inches from Mia's own. Mia could feel Kay's breath tickle her own lips.

She could not move.

"Quit being such a prude and have a little fun for once," Kay said deviously.

And Mia could not offer even a modicum of resistance as the other girl's lips touched her own.

Jenna looked around, and did not fail to notice that even though the feast was supposedly in honor of the Warriors of Vale, two of the them were missing. Mia's absence, was expected. The healer would be busy for quite a little while.

Garet's absence on the other hand, was rather unexpected. It wasn't like him at all to miss a feast.

So with those two gone, and Piers and Sheba in other lands, only herself, Isaac, Ivan, and Felix were there to enjoy the feast. The other seats were taken by various parents, as well as Hammet and Lady Layana.

Conversation buzzed between the grownups, but the present half of the Warriors of Vale were quiet.

Jenna had asked several times what the purpose of the feast was, and what he was going to be announcing at its conclusion, but Ivan would not tell her. Jenna considered

simply making him tell her, but he had promised that there would be quite a surprise at the end, and she was a total sucker for surprises. She decided that forcing Ivan to tell her would just spoil the fun.

And Jenna loved fun. She smiled as she thought of what she had accomplished. Isaac was hers, Mia was out of the way, and her brother trusted her again. And of course, she had her book back.

Jenna closed her eyes and thought of the book. Now that she had it back, she was never going to let it go again. She could feel its warm, reassuring energy humming to her from within the bag under her chair. Her body grew pleasantly warm as the energy filled her, like the bright rays of a summer's sun. She moaned quietly, and squirmed a bit in her seat. She felt like something in her was about to change, and the feeling grew in her like a wave about to crash down. She moaned again as it drew near, and...

"Jenna?"

She opened her eyes. Ivan was staring at her with a confused expression.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She smiled. "I've never been better."

As the clock struck the ninth hour, there was a roar that echoed throughout the palace.

Everyone rose and rushed outside, not quite in a panic, but in a frantic excitement. All those who had gathered for the feast rushed out and stood in a crowd at the steps of the palace gate. Ivan was the first out, with Jenna and the two Venus Adepts close behind her.

High above the city, a great red image appeared, and began to circle above. Jenna gasped in awe as she realized just what she was looking at.

A giant red dragon.

The beast roared once more, and then it swept down, passing dangerously close to the city. As it drew near, Jenna felt a powerful wave of Psynergy wash over her, and she realized that the creature was an artificial construct created by an Adept. Never before had she felt so much Psynergy being used in a single moment, so it was overwhelming.

The dragon swept by them once more, then landed upon the palace roof. It gave a mighty roar that was so loud it shook the ground they stood upon, then it flapped its wings and rose back into the sky.

The dragon flew until it was a safe distance from the city, then it burst open in an explosion of orange light. The dragon's energy showered down over the city like orange snowflakes, and everyone was cheering.

Once the applause died down a bit, Gareth emerged from the shadows behind the palace, and did a theatrical bow.

"Thank you, everyone," he said. "I also do birthdays."

Jenna excitedly joined the others congratulating Gareth on the awe-inspiring display. As she drew near him, his grin did not fade, but his hands quickly found themselves in his pockets.

He did not take them out until after she left.

Gareth sighed, drained after that excessive display.

The announcement itself had been nothing special. Some amusement park place where young Adepts could train their Psynergy while also learning the story of the Warriors of Vale. Hammet had been planning to build it for some time, but it was only now that it was being unveiled to the public. The response had been positive, but nobody had really been that interested after the feast and the Psynergy dragon.

Not that the announcement itself was important even to the people who had planned it. To Gareth and Ivan, the real mission had been carried out clandestinely.

Gareth found Ivan alone in the hall, waiting for him. The guest had cleared a few minutes earlier, leaving only them.

"Did it work?" Gareth asked him.

Ivan looked down at the floor. "It did and it didn't. I was able to read her mind quite easily. And from her reaction, she was very well distracted. But..."

"But what?"

Ivan sighed. "Her mind was empty. There was nothing. Static. That can only mean two things. The first is that she was able to totally block my mind reading Psynergy ahead of time with her own will. And Hama is the only person I've ever met who could do that. It's possible that the book gave her the power, but the other possibility is more likely."

"And that possibility is?"

"That I was picking up her thoughts," Ivan said. "And I just couldn't understand them. That Jenna's entire mind has been... replaced by something too alien for me to understand."

Silence settled over the hall as the weight of Ivan's words set in. If that was true, and Jenna's entire mind was really taken over by something like that, then...

Could they even save her?

Ivan turned to Gareth, his eyes serious. "Go home and pack your things. We have to get out of here tonight."

"W-what are you saying?"

"It's too dangerous to stay here," Ivan said. "I've seen the emptiness in Isaac and Felix's eyes. They're her puppets now. And if her power is as great as I fear, then we have to get away from her while we still can. It's only a matter of time before everyone in town is assimilated. We three have to leave, and come back when we know more and have a better plan."

"Why can't we just make that plan now?"

"Because it won't take her very long to figure out that we know!" Ivan practically hissed at him. "As soon as she checks for that ring, and realizes it's gone, she'll panic and just start turning everyone around her into her damn thralls until she figures out who is immune. She probably won't notice its absence until tomorrow, but she could figure it out as early as tonight! She could be walking in her house right now, and checking to see if its still there."

"Fuck..." Gareth muttered, his blood running cold. "The cookies..."

"What?"

"The cookies that Kay made me return!" Gareth said. "As soon as she gets home, she'll see those and know I was in her

house. She'll see the ring is gone, and she'll put two-and-two together. She'll figure out that everything that we did tonight was to read her!"

Ivan's face was as pale as snow. "Oh, gods. We should have left as soon as you showed up today. Go now! Hurry and get only what you need! I'll get Mia, and we'll meet back here! We'll escape through the tunnels in the back!"

Garet nodded, and took off.

"Mia, we have to-!"

Ivan froze.

The room was empty. Mia was gone.

Garet burst through the front door of his house, to find that nobody was there. His house was barren, and deathly quiet.

"Where is everyone...?" he muttered under his breath. Dark images formed in his mind's eye. He saw Jenna, standing before his entire family, who bowed to her.

He shook his head. He was just overreacting. They were likely just at some afterparty somewhere. He felt the Cleric's Ring around his finger, and assured himself that it would protect him from Jenna's control.

He went to his room and grabbed his bag. He threw what essentials he could in there, and he grabbed his sword off the wall. With the blade strapped across his back, he ran back downstairs and into the kitchen. After stuffing some food into the bag, he turned and ran outside the house.

Where a crowd of people were waiting for him.

He stopped dead in his tracks. Everyone was there. Everyone in Kalay. All the people who had lived their lives there, and all the refugees from Vale. A massive crowd of people, who blocked every path of escape.

Isaac and Felix.

And Jenna.

There were no pretensions in the way Jenna stared at him. She watched him, with hungry, menacing eyes. Eyes that did not blink.

"Going somewhere, Gareth?"

She knew.

His eyes darted around, looking for a way to escape. There was none. And that's when he saw it.

Mia and his sister, standing at the edge of the group. Their arms were wrapped around each other, and their lips were on each other like they had been glued together. Kay broke off her kiss with Mia, and started to trail kisses from her neck to her collarbone, while Mia looked right at him and grinned.

Mia was gone.

Garet's panic turned to rage, and he faced Jenna. "What have you done to them?!"

"I made them happy, of course," Jenna told him. "I've made everyone here happy. Everyone, tell Gareth how happy you all are."

"We are... happy..."

"We are happy."

"Happy..."

"All... happy..."

Garet took a step away from them, his back meeting the door of his house.

"Hold him still," Jenna instructed the two Venus Adepts at her sides.

Before Garet could get away, Isaac and Felix had moved in and seized him, holding him fast by his arms. He tried to pull away, but in their thrall they were far stronger than he was.

"Remove his weapons and that bag in his hand," Jenna said.

They did so. His sword was removed from his back, and the dagger in his pocket was thrown aside.

It would have been easy to escape with Psynergy, but he just couldn't do that to his friends. He couldn't hurt them.

Not even when they were like this...

"I could just remove that ring on your finger and turn you right now," Jenna said with a smile. "But what's the fun in that? You will be turned in time. First, I think I should reward you. You see, you treated us all with that little show earlier. You know, with the dragon and all. So I think it's only fair that we give you a little show in return."

Jenna snapped her fingers, and Kay and Mia moved from the edge of the crowd to right in front of Garet.

Mia started to remove Kay's clothes, and too late Garet realized what was happening.

"No! You sick perverted bitch! That's my sister!"

"Oh, Gareth," Jenna said, far too sweetly. "We are no longer bound by blood. We are all children of the same being. We are connected by the love that the book has shown me. The love of Aarazsarhl. And soon, you too will feel his love..."

Despite how sickened he was by what Mia was doing to his sister, the fact remained that Gareth was still looking at two beautiful young women, and his body still reacted all the same.

"Well, look at that," Jenna observed. "It seems he is enjoying this after all. Wouldn't you agree?"

Ivan emerged from the crowd and nodded.

Gareth closed his eyes and turned away. He fought the urge to cry. Everything had ever known was gone. Everyone he had loved was under Jenna's control now. He was the only one who was still free, and once Jenna was done with her perverse amusement, she would take the ring off him and he would be gone, too.

"Resistance is futile, Gareth," Ivan said. "Give in and submit. The pleasure is indescribable."

Gareth heard moaning, and he wasn't sure if it was coming from Mia, Kay, or Jenna. Or perhaps all of them.

Then Jenna moaned loudly, and he could not keep his eyes closed any longer. He saw the briefest flash of Mia's tongue running across his sister's navel, before he looked up and saw Jenna.

She was holding a book, caressing it like a lover. Jenna moaned again, and her body twitched and squirmed like she was the one being kissed by Mia. Strangely enough, Mia and Kay had ceased their perverse display, and were looking up

at Jenna. All of the people in thrall were looking at Jenna. Ivan, Isaac, Felix...

"It's..." Jenna moaned. "Happening... It's... oh, it's waking up... Mmmmmm... yes... oh... yeeeeesss..."

Garet shoved Isaac and Felix away. They did not struggle. Their attention was fixed on Jenna. It was as though he had ceased to exist, as far as they were concerned. And as Jenna moaned once more, some insane part of him desired to stay and see what was going to happen.

"To hell with that."

Not wasting the moment, Garet grabbed his sword and bag from the ground and ran, pushing aside the dazed thralls gathered around Jenna.

In the distance, he could hear the sound of bones shattering, and Jenna's ecstatic cries.

As he ran, he saw Kraden standing outside his small home. The Alchemy sage was not with the thralls, he was simply standing on his own, absently watching the crowd from afar.

"Kraden!" Garet called out, stopping. "Kraden, are you under her control? Are you free?"

The sage turned slowly to him. "Ah, Garet. How nice to see you. Have you met my wife?"

And then Kraden stepped aside, and Garet could see inside his house, where a half-rotten corpse was seated at his table.

"Isn't she lovely, Garet? Jenna brought her back for me..."

And the corpse slowly turned its head and looked back at Gareth with empty eye sockets.

"Gods..." Gareth gasped.

An ear-splitting shriek filled the air, and Gareth spun around to face the direction he had ran from. And then he saw something he would never forget.

Jenna was rising from the ground, large bat-like wings carrying her up. Her red hair was longer, reaching down to her ankles. A tail hung from the base of the base of her spine, with a dart-like point at the end. And her eyes glowed bright red. Her red lips were curled in the cruelest of smiles.

"You can run, Gareth," she laughed. "But you will return."

Run he did. He ran and ran until the city of Kalay was but a flickering light on the horizon, and he continued to run. He ran all night, until dawn finally broke from atop the trees, and he collapsed of exhaustion in a glen within the woods.

And he dreamed dreams about Jenna, and the beautiful devil she had become.

3. Part III

It was a cold and overcast morning in the small town of Vault.

The clouds were gathering and dark. There was a warning of a coming storm hanging over the village, yet not a single drop had yet fallen. The people were quiet today, as they often were on such days, going about their business as quickly and efficiently as they could, in case a storm should break.

But things remained in that tense state of anticipation.

A cloaked figure arrived that morning, a tall man from another land who carried the faint scent of the seas. He said little, but he was kind and polite to all who spoke to him. He went immediately to the inn and paid for a room for three, even though he was the only one there. He then spent most of the day outside by the town gate, seemingly waiting for someone.

The sun was starting to set when that person arrived.

Another traveller, this one a young girl with short hair the colour of sand. She wore no cloak, and carried no pretences of mystery about her. She arrived with a smile, and spoke cheerfully, though there was a trace of worry behind her optimism.

Together, the two travellers went into the inn.

The storm did not break that day, but the clouds never went away.

"Thank you," Piers said to the waitress, as he took the refilled tea cup from her.

The young lady smiled, perhaps blushed a little – it was hard to tell in the dimly lit inn – and left to tend to somebody at another table. Which was well enough to the two Adepts. They wanted to be left alone. And with the exception of a hooded man drinking from a bottle of ale at the next seat, they were.

"So..." Sheba muttered, studying Piers closely in the dark room. "Your letters... they say the same thing?"

Piers glanced down at the hand-written notes on the table, which he had read over earlier. "Indeed. The wording differs slightly, but the message is the same in the letters I have received. He at least trusts you and I to the same degree, if nothing else."

Sheba took a sip from her glass – she was drinking coffee – and she frowned. "So what do you think about all this?"

"It's a stretch to believe something like this could happen," Piers muttered, scratching his chin. "But... we have both known Gareth for some time. He's a prankster, for sure. He loves to have his fun... but I see no way that he could make a practical joke out of this. There's a dozen other stories he could have told to get us back here. What he's written in these letters, well... it just doesn't seem like a story he would make up."

"It did sound awfully outlandish..."

"I remember that book," Piers continued. "The one Gareth wrote about. The Gabomba statue gave it to us. And Felix warned us not to use it."

"I remember that," Sheba said, nodding.

"And I remember that Felix said he was going to get rid of it," Piers said quietly. "It's possible that he forgot, or that the book was exerting its influence on him even then, and that he wanted to keep it for himself. Whatever the case may be, if Gareth is telling the truth than things have gotten bad."

"Worse than bad," said the person seated next to them. Piers and Sheba turned to this man, who pulled down his hood and revealed himself to be Gareth. "It's nigh-hopeless."

Sheba and Piers were shocked at the appearance of their friend. Gareth looked like a man haunted. His red hair, normally spiked up, was dirty and loose and hid his eyes under long bangs. He hadn't shaved in some time, and he had a rough stubble on his chin. His eyes were dull and tired, framed by black rings that told of many sleepless nights.

"Gareth..." Sheba muttered, concern in her voice. "You look..."

"Terrible," he finished for her, looked down at the almost-empty bottle of ale in his hands. "I know. I haven't been sleeping much. When I close my eyes, I can still see her. She appears in my dreams. I don't know if its her magic, or just my own damn brain tormenting me, but I can't escape from her no matter where I go."

"You're not making this up, are you?" Sheba said, looking deep into Gareth's eyes and praying she would find some hint of his former jovial humour. She found nothing but despair.

"How could I possibly make this up...?" Gareth said quietly, as much to himself as them. "I saw it. I saw it all. I saw her enslaving everyone... I saw Kraden's dead wife turn and look

at me... I saw Jenna flying and transforming into some sort of demon...!"

Sheba placed her hand on Gareth's wrist and gave him a supportive smile.

Piers looked at the letter he'd brought with him and tore it into little pieces. "We're the only ones here. I'm assuming that's because we're the only ones you could ask for help."

"She has everyone else..." Gareth said in a small voice. "Isaac and Felix, and even Ivan and Mia, who were working with me to stop her only hours before I had to flee. And not just them... everyone in Kalay."

"I don't understand, what did she do to them?" Sheba asked.

"I couldn't tell you," he said. "One minute, they were themselves, the next they were her slaves. They just stopped being who they were, and they became puppets that did anything she told them to. And she didn't need to cast a spell, or touch them, or anything. She just made decided it would happen, and it did."

"And what kept you suffering the same fate?" Piers asked.

"A ring," Gareth said. He wore gloves over his hands, but Sheba and Piers could still see the shape of a ring on the third finger of his right hand. "A ring that Felix had. I remember that Isaac found it on an island early in our quest. It let us use cursed equipment without the harmful effects. Mia gave it to Felix because he found that Darksword."

"I remember that," Piers said.

"It protected Felix from the book, but eventually Jenna found out and made him take it off. I found it and took it. Even

after turning everyone else in the town, I was unaffected by her magic."

"Why didn't Jenna just keep it on her person?"

Garet shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe she couldn't. But as long as I have this thing on me, she can't use her powers on me. She took everyone else in town... Felix, Isaac, Ivan, Mia... But not me."

"Do you think we have a chance of saving her?" Sheba asked, her eyes hopeful and optimistic.

"I don't know," Garet said heavily. "I have no idea what this thing is, or what it's done to her, or if we can even stop it. But I brought you both here because I need you to do something."

"Of course," Sheba said. "Anything."

"It's been two whole months since I was in Kalay," he said. "I don't know what's going on over there, but it can't be good. I sometimes see her... taunting me in my dreams. The evil energy radiates from the city, all the way across the river. Something is going to happen, and I have to go back. I'm the only one who has any chance of stopping her."

"We'll go with you," Piers immediately offered.

"No," Garet told him. "I can't let that happen. You would become her puppets the moment she saw you."

"Perhaps we could protect ourselves somehow...?" Sheba suggested. "With Psynergy, or just by resist-"

"If it was possible to resist it, Ivan would never have fallen!" Garet almost shouted, drawing the attention of a few other

patrons in the bar. Their stares did not linger, however. Gareth was known to the people of Vault as a crazy drunk. Once the chatter returned, he continued more quietly, "Ivan's mind was the strongest out of any of us, and he was Jenna's thrall the moment she decided he should be. It's not possible to resist it... not without the ring, and we only have one of them. No, I need you two to do something different for me."

"What is it?" Piers asked.

"Go to all the major cities," Gareth said. "Bilibin, Tolbi, Madra, Izumo, Lemuria, Contigo... and any others you can think of. Speak to the leaders and tell them what is happening. If my mission fails, and I'm killed or turned, it will be up to the rest of the world to take up arms and stop Jenna. Convince them of the importance of this threat, and get them to unite their forces."

"Gareth... are you sure about this?" Sheba asked.

"I've had nothing to do these past two months but think about this," he said, his eyes narrow and full of pain.

Sheba and Piers exchanged an understanding glance. They could see that the person they had once called Gareth was gone, the horrible things he had been through having robbed him of any trace of hope or joy. The only outcomes he could see now were stopping Jenna and the evil book, or dying in the process.

"It's not likely that even an army could stop her," he continued. "If she can turn anyone who comes near her, then what good would an army do? But it's the last chance we have. An army could destroy Kalay, and kill all the people she's already turned. If they attack from far away, they might have a chance. It's a slim chance, but it's the only hope we have if I fail."

Garet rose from his seat, pulling his black hood back up over his head. He extended his gloved hand to Piers, and then to Sheba, and they shook hands one last time with their friend.

"Please, do not fail me," Garet pleaded. "Because if you do, this might be the end of everything."

"We will do our best," Piers assured him.

Garet nodded in thanks. Sheba smiled to him, though her eyes were sad. Garet did his best to return the smile, but he had been unable to do that since the day he'd fled Kalay.

The Mars Adept then left his last two friends, to begin his journey back to Kalay – where all his nightmares waited.

"Garet, my love..."

He felt her hands running across his bare chest. Her touch was as soft as velvet. He looked up to her, taking in the warm depths of her fiery eyes. He'd always loved her fire – it was the thing they shared, the art they had both learnt to master in their youth.

Jenna leaned forward, kissing his neck. He could not move, somehow, but he didn't want to. Her lips touched his skin, and the spot seemed to tingle. She kissed him again and again, moving up to his mouth. She bit gently on his bottom lip.

"I was wrong about Isaac," Jenna said to him, her voice rich and lovely. "I was foolish not to see how much better you always were. You, who always loved me and cared for me. I ignored you, and it hurt you. I was blind to this, and it was a mistake."

Jenna kissed him again, this time moving down, past his neck, and across his chest. She continued to travel down, and the heat continued to grow.

"I'll make it up to you, Gareth," she said to him. "I'll give you everything you ever desired."

Gareth gasped as he exploded in ecstasy, and then he opened his eyes and Jenna was gone. He was underneath a tree, lying in mud and filth, taking what little shelter he could from the relentless rain that had beat down on him since he'd set out from Vault.

Shaking, he rose on unsteady legs. The dream had been so vivid – far too lucid and real to have been a proper dream. He'd had similar dreams before. Jenna would come to him from time to time and tie him down to her bed. Up to that point, he would fight her. He'd fight and scream and do everything he could to kill her, but once her hands were on him, he was powerless. One he felt her softness and warmth, he would forget all about the horrible things she had done. It was only him and his childhood crush – the evil book ceased to be in these dreams. And that terrified him.

Gareth did as he had done for the past few days and continued on, making his way down the road under the pouring rain. When he'd been staying in Vault, his dreams of Jenna had been infrequent, but now that he was drawing closer to Kalay, they came to him every time he slept.

He encountered no other travellers on the road. Kalay, once a thriving merchant city, was now an enigma with closed gates and armed guards. Merchants did not waste their time trying to get in anymore, and they had moved on elsewhere. Gareth was the only one on the road to Kalay now.

He had no real plan when it came to getting inside. He would figure a plan out once he'd actually gotten there and analysed the place. Once he was inside, though, he knew what he had to do. Find the book and destroy it. And if he could not do that... then he would kill Jenna.

And he was plagued with such doubts. In his dreams, he was as helpless to resist Jenna as the people of Kalay had been. But it was worse than just mere powerlessness. He was terrified because he enjoyed it. He enjoyed losing to her in those dreams and being at her mercy. He'd always wanted Jenna to want him, and in those dreams, the dynamic was suddenly reversed – it was Jenna who was chasing him.

He knew his mission was likely doomed to failure, but still he kept on marching towards Kalay, where Jenna waited for him.

The next day, he made it to Kalay. He sat down in the woods outside the town, and waited for night to fall. He ate the last of his food, knowing it was probably his last meal, and then he stood up, his sword at his side, and marched down the hill towards the city walls.

In his boot he had a dagger concealed. If he was caught and overpowered, he intended to use the dagger to take his own life. Better to die at his own hand than to become one of Jenna's zombies.

There were two guards standing outside the gates, he saw, and various others patrolling the streets. They were former palace guards, repositioned and re-purposed – he could tell by the armour they wore.

There was no way to get in through the main entrance, but he knew there was another way. Garet slipped back into the woods and headed back to towards the cave entrance that

went to the underground tunnels. He didn't know if Jenna knew about the secret entrance or not – she likely did, but it would be less guarded either way and it would take him right where he needed to go.

An hour or so later, he made it to the tunnel entrance. There was a guard there – likely the same as before all this business had gone down. The man was undoubtedly enthralled, so Gareth justified to himself that killing him was a mercy.

From where Gareth was hidden in the tree line, he threw a ball of fire that struck the guard square in the chest. The man immediately cried out in pain, dropping his spear, and throwing himself down on the ground and rolling around to put it out.

Gareth burst out of the woods, charging towards the burning guard and drawing his sword. He brought the blade down on the back of the man's neck. The sword did not have enough momentum, so it did not go clean through. Blood sprayed out of the man's half-severed neck, and he looked to Gareth with terrified, confused eyes.

Gareth tried to pull his sword out of the man's neck so he could finish the job, but it was stuck fast in the bone of his spine. The man was coughing up mouthfuls of blood, thrashing and convulsing around on the ground. He was also still on fire.

"D-damn it!" Gareth cursed, trying again in vain to pull his sword free. He'd wanted it to be a quick, clean kill. Now the man was screaming and trying to get away. Gareth kicked at the man's head, trying to knock it free of his shoulders. The first time did nothing – the man just continued to scream. He was crying. Gareth kicked him a couple more times, and

finally the head broke free and rolled away, coming to rest a few yards down the hill. The guard's dead eyes seemed to be looking right at Gareth.

He felt like throwing up, but he didn't his stomach was full enough to do so. He averted his eyes from the now-headless corpse, and pinched his nose to block out the strong odour of blood in the air. The path to the tunnel was now clear, he reminded himself. That was what was important. He wiped his sword, sheathed it, and continued on.

The tunnel was dark and every little sound he made echoed across the walls. Gareth was forced to conjure a psynergic flame in his hand to illuminate his passage. The sound of flowing water eventually came to him, and he knew he was getting close to the sewers beneath the palace. Finally, Gareth emerged to the sewers and he knew he was just beneath the palace.

His memories of passing through the tunnels before, so many years ago, were still fresh in his mind. He, Isaac, Ivan, and Mia had just returned from Lunpa, having saved Hammet from Dodonpa's dungeons. They had stopped by to collect their reward from Hammet, and spend a night resting at the palace. Despite their haste to catch Saturos and Menardi and save Jenna and Kraden, there had been no sense of urgency back then. Their spirits had been high, and they had walked through those sewers laughing and celebrating their success.

Now Gareth was alone, sneaking through the darkness, on his way to kill the girl he had spend a year and a half travelling over the world to save. The other three members of his group were gone, as were Jenna and Felix, his two childhood friends. They were not dead, but trapped in a state worse than death. While there was always the chance that

destroying the book could return them to their original selves, he had little hope it would be that easy.

Garet ascended the stairs and found himself at the last door before he would be back in the palace. He hesitated. Now was his last chance to go back. Once he went through that door, he would have no choice but to go through with it.

But Garet hadn't come all the way there to turn around. He placed his hand on the doorknob and slowly pushed it open, knowing full well that anyone could be waiting on the other side and see him.

But there was something far worse waiting for him.

The interior of the Kalay Palace was transformed into something horribly alien. The walls, ceiling, and floor were covered in a mesh-like weave of pink, fleshy roots. Some kind of liquid pulsed through them, flowing towards the centre of the palace.

Shocked, Garet took a cautious step inside, his boots pressing down on the vein-like substance. He heard a slow groan from nearby, and for a second he feared he had been found. He turned to see a man on the wall behind him, half-buried in the fleshy roots. The man was unclothed and bound at his wrists and ankles by the pink coils. Several of the tendrils had pierced his flesh and were pumping their fluid into him. The man's eyes were open, but glazed over in a expression of blissful emptiness. His mouth was curled in a smile.

Whatever it was that was happening to the man, he was clearly enjoying it. Garet left him, continuing down the halls, surrounded on all sides by the alien substance. As he went, he saw others, men and women both, all naked and bound to the walls by the veins. They were all similarly penetrated

by the things, and wore the same dreamy, vague expression as the first.

Garet passed through the long halls silently, perturbed by the eeriness of what he was seeing. He wondered, what was happening to them? Why had Jenna – or the book – put them there like this?

It didn't take him long to reach door to the throne room. He knew that what he sought was there. The liquids in the vein-like things were flowing to that particular room.

He took a deep breath, and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. It was now or never. He drew the blade, and kicked the door open.

A strange, terrible sight greeted him. Resting in the centre of what had once been Hammet's throne room, he saw a large flesh-like egg sac the size of a small house. The fleshy veins that ran from the sleeping people flowed to it, and it accepted the juices with heart-like pulses. Though he only saw the vague shape of it, something was growing inside the egg – it glowed a faint blue sight.

The next thing Garet saw was Jenna, asleep on the throne. She was as he had last seen her – mutated into a terribly beautiful siren. Her skin was as pale as snow, and her hair as red as fire. He did his best to ignore the large wings and tail she had grown, which led him to notice the next thing.

A trail of the fleshy veins protruded from Jenna's stomach, running the length of the throne room down to the large egg. It was some sort of twisted mockery of pregnancy, and the father of the child was the book that she still cradled in her arms.

There it was, Gareth thought. Jenna was asleep, and she had the book. All he had to do was cross the room and destroy it, and then perhaps this madness would all go away.

Still holding his sword, Gareth took a few careful steps into the room. A savage scream turned his blood ice-cold. Gareth turned, seeing his attacker charging at him in a mindless fury.

He ducked, avoiding the sword swing that would have taken his head. His attacker stumbled, tripping over him and collapsing onto the pink guts that covered the floor. Gareth climbed to his feet, taking a step back and identifying his attacker.

Felix rose, and lifted up his sword.

"Please," Gareth said to his old friend. "Don't make me do this."

But it was not Felix he was speaking to. It was one of Jenna's mindless drones. The Felix he had grown up with was dead.

At least, that was what he had to tell himself.

Felix came at him again like a frenzied ape, swinging his sword in wild, desperate attacks that put the true Felix's calm swordplay to shame. Though Gareth was tired and hungry and not even close to the peak of his abilities, he was able to block Felix's attacks with ease.

Gareth caught Felix's sword in a parry, and spun it around until the blade flew from his enemy's hands. And then, he stepped forth and struck Felix across the head with his own sword's hilt. Felix crumpled to the ground.

Shaking with a combination of fear and adrenaline, Gareth turned around to see Jenna on the throne. She stirred, the noise of the fight having woke her from her slumber. She blinked her sleepy eyes, and they widened as she saw Gareth.

"It's you," she said. "You came back."

"I did," Gareth replied. "I came back to destroy that thing. I came back to save you all."

"Save us? But Gareth... can't you see we've already been saved? The Necronomicon gave me purpose. It gave me everything I ever desired. And it can give the same to you."

He had nothing to say to that. Sword in hand, he started towards Jenna.

A betraying flash of fear crossed Jenna's eyes. "Gareth. Please." She did not rise and flee from the throne – it would seem she could not move from it.

He took a few steps closer.

"Stop him!"

Gareth heard an angry cry, and turned around in time to see Felix, back on his feet, charging towards him. On instinct, Gareth lifted his sword. There was no time to do anything different. Felix ran himself right into the blade.

Time seemed frozen – the seconds dragging on – each their own infinity. Gareth blinked, his mind refusing to process what had just happened in front of him.

Felix coughed, and red specks stained his lips and chin. He fell away from Gareth, sliding off the outstretched sword and

collapsing on the ground. He convulsed a few times, and then moved no more.

Garet had prepared himself for this. Truly he had, running through the scenarios a hundred times in his head. He knew he might have to kill his friends to end whatever evil had warped their minds. But to see it happen before his eyes...

He felt cold. So very cold.

And yet, he knew it was not finished. Gripping his sword tight, he turned around, and faced Jenna again.

Her eyes were wide in disbelief. She stared at the lifeless body of her big brother, and she slowly shook her head.

"No... No, it can't be..."

She knew this time it was final. Felix would not come back again, wearing a mask, or washing up on a drifting island. This time, he was truly and finally dead.

Even in the best possible of scenarios, where Garet destroyed the book and everything somehow magically went back to normal, there would still be scars. Garet no longer believed in such a scenario, but there had always been that glimmer of hope that it could still happen, buried deep down under all those layers of pain and emptiness. The possibility had still been there.

But now, it was gone. Even in that scenario, Felix would still be gone forever.

Some small part of Garet seemed to snap at that moment, and he turned to Jenna, a twisted grin across his features. "Well? Where's your damn book now? Why not use it to bring him back to life? He might be a mindless puppet if you

did, but you had no problem reducing everyone to that already, didn't you?!"

Jenna visibly flinched at his words, a reaction he hadn't been expecting.

"Why, Jenna?!" Gareth demanded. "Why did you do this?! Why did you destroy everything?!"

"I just..." Jenna struggled to find the words. Tears ran down her cheeks. "It all seemed so right, I..." Her voice faltered, consumed with sobs. She seemed her old self again, for the first time since she'd found that damn book. Gareth was looking at the same Jenna he and Isaac had comforted years ago after that storm. The frightened, vulnerable girl who had cried on his shoulder when she'd thought her entire family had been wiped out.

"Let me destroy it," Gareth said in a thin voice. "Things are too far gone to go back to the way they were, but we can still have something. No one else has to die."

Jenna hesitated, glancing down at the book in her arms. She was considering it, and that made Gareth's heart pound with a renewed hope.

And then, that small sliver of hope was shattered when Jenna's face twisted with rage.

"No."

The next thing Gareth heard was the sound of thick, slimy flesh moving. The veins woven into the walls began to break apart, as dozens of people climbed out of their fleshy prisons. The townspeople, all wearing the same mindless empty expression, started towards Gareth with a mindless intensity.

"No!" Jenna screamed, clutching the book close to her chest. "Not my baby! Not my child! I won't let you take my child from me!"

Knowing he had only one chance, Gareth started running towards the throne again, his sword raised high. He killed his humanity, focusing only on the singular goal of bringing his sword down on Jenna's bare neck.

But it wasn't enough. Some small part of him still hesitated, and he wasted a fraction of a second he did not have.

Deep down, he knew he could not do it. Not after just killing Felix. Perhaps if his sword had still been clean, or if the girl on the throne was someone other than Jenna. But he just couldn't do it.

Even after everything, he still loved her.

The next Gareth knew, he was being restrained by several men, his sword taken from him, and being brought to kneel in front of the throne.

Jenna did not rise – Gareth had been right in that she could not leave it. She stared down at him with a hatred the true Jenna could never have had. It broke Gareth's heart to see it, but he knew he had failed.

"Remove his gloves. Take that ring from him. He will be one of us yet."

One of the people holding him back moved out of the group and crouched down before Gareth. With a small start, he realised it was Isaac.

Gareth's gloves were removed, and Isaac stared for a moment at his bare hands. Unsure what to do, he silently turned back

to Jenna and showed her Gareth's hands.

She blinked. "Where is the Cleric Ring? You cannot resist the book's powers without it..."

Garet started to laugh. "You're not turning me. I made sure of that. I came here to save you all or die in the process. In the end, I couldn't do it, but there's no way in hell I'm becoming your puppet. Those dreams you made me have? The temptation? I would never give in! I'm sorry Jenna... but you're just gonna have to kill me."

"The ring has to be on you to work," Jenna muttered, ignoring his speech. "Carrying it in your pocket wouldn't work..."

Garet laughed again.

"Tell me!" Jenna demanded.

He looked up at her, triumphant even in his defeat. "You always used to tease me about how hungry I was. You said I could eat anything."

She stared at him in silence for a few moments, as it set in. "You swallowed it?"

He answered her with a silence of his own.

Jenna frowned, shifting in her seat. Her thralls held Gareth tight, though he made no effort to escape. Isaac stood before Gareth, a silent puppet, patiently waiting for Jenna's next order. Gareth wore a satisfied smile, content in his victory.

And then Jenna turned back to Gareth, and her lips curled into a smile.

"Oh, Gareth. You poor fool."

The thralls pulled Gareth back, and he began to panic as he realised what was about to happen. He was forced down to the floor, several of the townspeople holding his arms and shoulders, while others held his legs. He struggled to get away as his shirt was pulled off, but to no avail.

Ivan approached him, holding a curved knife in his hands.

"He'll scream and thrash about," Jenna told her minions. "Try not to make too much of a mess. He needs to survive it, after all."

"No! No! Noooooo!"

Gareth screamed as Ivan drove the knife into his gut.

A few minutes later, Gareth's hell was over. Idly, he was aware of the enthralled Mia crouched down in front of him, the glow of psynergy around her as she patched his wounds. The pain was gone, but the memory of it was enough. Never, in all his life, had Gareth felt pain like that.

"M-Mia..." he said, his voice weak.

She did not answer him. She did not even so much as glance at him. As her healing was finished, she rose and walked away to a corner of the throne room, where Kay was waiting.

"Though they are my puppets, they are not without their pleasures," Jenna said to Gareth. "You will have what you desire as well. Everything you desire... forever."

Gareth turned his head slightly to the side, where he saw Felix's corpse on the floor in a growing pool of red. The

thralls were standing at the ready in a large circle at the edge of the room.

"You've... already forgotten..." Gareth gasped, his eyes locked on his dead friend.

"It is nearly time," Jenna said to everyone. "My child is about to come into the world. It will be born, and we will be the ones to welcome it."

The massive egg-like sac was glowing. It pulsed and throbbed, as something within it was seeking to be born. Some horrible, inhuman thing that sought to taint the world with its existence.

"It's about to awaken."

The creature clawed again at its womb, and the sac finally broke, flooding the room with a warm yellow fluid.

The thralls did not move, but Gareth did, struggling to climb up to his feet. He had to get away. There was no thought left in his head beyond that. The thing that was crawling out of that sac was unnatural, and at a primal level Gareth knew he had to get away. He managed to squirm about a bit, but his muscles screamed at him, and the pain in his gut returned.

The alien thing in the centre of the throne room took its first breath.

Tears of joy ran down Jenna's face.

"You're hungry. Go ahead, my child. Eat."

Gareth's panic grew as he felt the thing moving closer to where he was. He thrashed about, trying to urge his strengthless and suffering body into motion. His fingernails

dug into the fleshy substance coating the floor, and he tried to pull himself away from the monster as it crawled over to Felix's body.

Garet heard sickening crunching sounds from his dead friend as the creature had its first meal.

"Nonononono..." he sobbed.

"Garet?" Jenna said, looking over to him. "I'd forgotten about you. Look at my baby, Garet. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Oh gods, just make it end!"

"Garet."

"Garet, look."

"Garet, look at our baby."

"What...?" he muttered.

He turned, seeing Jenna sitting on the picnic blanket. In her lap was a child of only a few months. It babbled at its mother, and she laughed. She turned to him, smiling, her cheeks as red as her hair. Sunlight streamed in around her through the gaps in the trees.

"Garet, what are you doing? Come over and have some apples."

He was confused for a moment. In the back of his mind there was the nagging thought that something wasn't right. He felt there was something he'd forgotten.

"This little man doesn't have any teeth yet," Jenna giggled, holding a spoon up to her baby. "He can only eat applesauce. No apples for you until you're older."

Of course. That was his child. He could tell, because even though the baby's hair was still very thin, it was still very clearly the same red as his mother and father's.

"Isaac and his wife haven't decided on a name for their son yet," Jenna told him. "He mentioned the name 'Matthew' in his last letter. I like how that one sounds. I hope they pick it. It would be nice if they moved out here in Kalay with us. All three of the children could grow up together. Karis, Isaac's son, and our little angel here..."

It was nice. It was perfect. Everything he'd ever wanted. Why would he doubt something he had desired for so long?

"What's troubling you, love?" Jenna asked him.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "Just thinking, that's all..."

"Come join us," Jenna said. "I think Tyrell wants his daddy."

Smiling, Gareth got up and went to join his wife and son at the picnic blanket.

"My child, have you had your fill?"

The beast did not reply with human words. It lacked the biology to make such sounds. But it did respond to its mother, in some fashion, now that it was finished devouring Felix's corpse.

"You're still hungry? My, you've got quite the appetite. Well, go ahead. There's plenty here."

The beast helped itself to the enthralled people of Kalay, too lost in their perfect fantasies to know what was happening. It ate and ate and ate, but its hunger proved unending, and many hours later, when the sun was just beginning to return

from behind the horizon, only Jenna herself remained with the beast.

Of course, she could deny her child nothing.

Once it had finished with her, it turned away from Kalay, still hungry, and started towards Vault.

Five Years Later...

Piers made his usual rounds, walking with a bottle of fine wine in one hand, and a map in the other. The worn map was covered in red X's and circles, and little notes scrawled beside them. So many years, so many little notes. Each one a reminder of something lost.

In the distance he saw his ship anchored just off the coast. He thought back to his adventure all those years ago with Felix and the others. His ship had looked completely different back then. Now, equipped with cannons and a second set of wings, and bearing more than a few battle scars, it looked like a completely different vessel. A vessel meant not for exploring the world, but battling an enemy that could be fought by nothing else.

It broke his heart to think back to those peaceful days, but Piers refused to let himself forget them, or to dwell on anything else. That adventure had been the greatest joy he had ever known in the very many years he had been alive. Even though it brought him pain to think about the friends he had lost, he would still honour their memory whenever he could.

But still, it wasn't as though he had lost them all. Strolling down the beach, he found Sheba waiting for him, sitting on a large rock with her hands in her lap.

"So what are you thinking?" Sheba asked him as he drew near. "About this next attack, I mean? Do you think this could be the last?"

"Perhaps," Piers said. "I certainly hope it will be, but only the gods can know for sure, and they keep their silence. Though I hope that we are near the end of this, that is only the optimism I cannot help but feel speaking. The logical side of my thoughts urges me to be cautious of this - we've had false flags before, moments where we thought we were close to victory."

"Eloquent as always," she said with the hint of a smile. A few years ago, at the peak of their travels, that smile would have reached her eyes and stayed there. "Is that why you're drinking? Because this might be the end?"

"Each attack could be our last," he muttered. "Each drink could be my last. So I enjoy each one like it's my last. It's the only way to truly live in a time like this."

Sheba let out a long sigh. "Half a decade of this. Even Dullahan went down after only an hour or so. That damn thing... to think that something like that could even exist."

"If we stopped fighting it regularly, the eggs it lays would hatch," Piers reminded her. "Weyard would be filled with those aberrations."

"Sometimes I wonder if its even worth fighting it anymore. All of Angara and Gondowan have been consumed already. If it could travel across the oceans, would the other continents have survived at all? Even if we manage to finally kill it, what is there left after this? Two damn decades of attacking this thing again and again and again, each time managing to do nothing but smash its eggs and maybe make it bleed a

bit. And yet we always suffer losses. So many lives have been lost."

Piers was worried. Sheba sounded so close to giving up.

"If only I could have stopped him from going back there," she said, tears running down her cheeks. "We all knew it was a suicide mission, why didn't we fight him more? Why didn't we stop him by force even? He could still be here."

"Garet made his choice. Stopping him with force wouldn't have saved him."

"I could have stopped it all in the first place. I should have listened to Felix's concerns when he first found the book. I should have told him to throw that damn thing in the ocean and keep on sailing. Instead I argued with him, and I ended up driving Jenna to the book and starting all of this..."

"You shouldn't dwell on such things," Piers said, going to her side and placing his hand upon her shoulder. "It is good to remember the good times, but letting the mistakes of the past torment you is pointless. Hindsight is perfect, but back then, how could you have known what would happen?"

"I suppose you're right."

"You were just saying that you think this might be the end. The beast has never looked so wounded before. Dwell on that instead. We can still have a future, if we slay it. So we need to try as hard as we can."

Piers and Sheba both heard their third companion approaching from the ship, his footsteps making light splashing sounds in the shallow tide.

"The scouts have returned," said the newcomer. "The beast is on the move. Eggs have been spotted. But it seems sluggish. It would seem whatever it was we hit in the last fight really hurt it."

Sheba's eyes grew wide. "Are you certain, Alex?"

"It is what the scouts report." The blue haired man stood on the beach in dirtied, tattered white robes, a patch covering the right eye he had been missing when they'd found him. "The story is consistent from three different mouths, so I doubt it is a mistake."

Sheba rose to her feet, her eyes filled with the fire of renewed vigour. "I'm going to go ready the ship."

As she ran down the beach towards the ship, Alex turned to Piers. "She looks hopeful."

"What she dared to hope for was just confirmed," Piers told him. "The beast may be on its last legs. This fight will be her last, for sure. She won't leave tonight, not until the beast goes down... or we do."

Alex chuckled. "Good. I grow weary of this purgatory. Let it be done now, one way or another."

Piers stared for a long moment at the bottle in his hand, and then he took a long drink from it and when he took his lips away, it was empty. "Let's not keep her waiting, then."

A few minutes later, the three Adepts were in the Lemurian Ship, and a red flag was being waved from the crow's nest - the signal of attack.

The glow of Psynergy surrounded the vessel, and it lifted up from the water into the air.

Piers' ship took the lead, followed shortly by a dozen more flying Lemurian ships, and then by a hundred more water-bound vessels. The process made their way in the direction of Angara, where Jenna's child waited.

THE END